



WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT:

Reading resilience during the pandemic



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Students continued to make progress even if much of everyday life slowed down.

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Introduction

By Crispin Chatterton, Director of Education, GL Education

The pandemic has confronted schools across the globe with a public health challenge on a scale and of a duration few will have experienced before. Most were closed to in-person teaching and learning for several months last year and many remain closed now. Teaching of course didn't stop but in most countries was conducted remotely. Nevertheless, students and their teachers had to adapt to new ways of instruction and learning as the severity of the pandemic became more obvious and day-to-day life was severely curtailed.

The question is, how did children cope? How did lockdown affect their academic performance, their mental wellbeing and their social skills? In one sense, of course, it's too early to tell. Many schools have either not fully returned to in-person teaching for all or they are still in lockdown. Even where schools have largely resumed teaching as normal, social distancing and other public health protocols continue to have an impact on instruction and learning. It will take time to draw any firm conclusions about the longer-term effects of this unprecedented disruption.

On the other hand, schools are understandably eager to pinpoint what they can about their students as soon as possible. Some have been able to conduct assessments, particularly in the final few months of last year. Others are planning for tests as soon as is practicable during this academic year.

This report is a snapshot of the data we have gleaned from schools so far on students' reading ability based on our New Group Reading Test (NGRT). As the assessment cycle was disrupted for many schools by renewed lockdowns, it is based on preliminary results. We have also conducted an analysis of the data available from our other assessments about how children are faring in maths, science and English, which is available [here](#).

We hope that both reports will help schools support their students and teachers over the next few months – and provide a counterpoint to some of the less helpful speculation that has surrounded education since the pandemic began. Because all the signs are that although learning has been disrupted and children are understandably eager to get back into school and to return to normality, they are also resilient. Yes, some children have been significantly affected and some are undeniably struggling. But the evidence of the data we have and the testimony of teachers on the ground suggest that students continued to make progress even if much of everyday life slowed down.

Main findings

From the data available so far, there are reasons to believe that in international schools the reading ability of students has held up remarkably well – not only in comparison to previous years but also in comparison to schools in the UK. The main score we use in NGRT is called the ‘Standard Age Score’ (SAS). Student attainment is benchmarked to a norm group of performances from children of the same age who are representative of the student population.

In a typical year, without the impact of Covid-19, we would expect little variation from a mean score of 100 within a population. Any movement greater than 3 SAS points is deemed significant when considering such large datasets. As you can see from the table below, students’ scores in international schools remained stable (Please note that no distinction is made between primaries and secondaries in the international schools category).

School type	2018-2019	2019-2020
England state primary	0.5	-1.9
England state secondary	0.6	-0.5
England independent	0.2	-2.1
International schools	-0.4	-0.1

Table 1: Average variation in NGRT mean SAS for the periods 2018-2019 and 2019-2020

Nonetheless, the overall picture is clear – children’s reading ability does not appear to have been significantly affected by the disruption caused by the pandemic, regardless of type of school. Primary school children seem to have been affected a little more than secondary school students, but not significantly.

Using the same data, we can see that in 2018-19 in international schools, 50% of them registered a drop in students’ SAS scores and 50% a rise. Last year during the pandemic the proportion that saw a drop in their overall scores increased slightly to 52.8% while the number who witnessed a rise correspondingly fell to 47.2% – overall, a minor change in students’ reading abilities given the scale of the disruption to their learning.

School type	2018-2019		2019-2020	
	Schools with fall in mean SAS	Schools with Increase in mean SAS	Schools with fall in mean SAS	Schools with Increase in mean SAS
England state primary	43.4%	56.6%	78.3%	21.7%
England state secondary	46.9%	53.1%	53.4%	46.6%
England independent	44.1%	55.9%	74.7%	25.3%
International schools	50.0%	50.0%	52.8%	47.2%

Table 2: Percentage of schools with increased or decreased SAS for the periods 2018-2019 and 2019-2020

What are the implications?

Reports from individual schools around the world appear to back up the broader picture. Both of the schools in this report – the Nord Anglia International School in Dubai and the Canadian School in Guadalajara, Mexico – say that the reading ability of the majority of their students not only met but exceeded expectations. What is remarkable about this is that a large percentage of the students concerned are EAL students, many of whom cannot count on English language immersion in the home.

While we have found overall that reading ability has remained consistent, it is important to understand that there is increased variability in school SAS scores in the UK and overseas, which suggests wider fluctuations in individual student performance. In both the Dubai and Guadalajara schools, for instance, teachers report that while on the whole average and higher ability students met or exceeded expected progress in their reading, some of these students struggled. Nor can it be assumed that all the components of reading have been absorbed equally well. If decoding and reading recall appear strong, can the same be said of inference and comprehension? Although we did not see much difference in performance on these sections of the test at a global level, at school level, it is likely that there are differences occurring.

Unfortunately, it is not always easy to identify which students need what support. Even if children are back in school, it's not straightforward to put in place interventions such as group guided reading or listening to children read aloud when students are forced to wear masks and strict social distancing measures are in place. As one teacher in Dubai observed: "You can teach remotely, but it's harder to investigate remotely. You have to check for all ability ranges because some of the levers that were available in school aren't available anymore."

Her remarks underscore the importance of schools conducting assessments as soon as is practicable and benchmarking them against the baseline. That should give a more detailed insight into reading behaviours and enable teachers to decide which child needs what support.



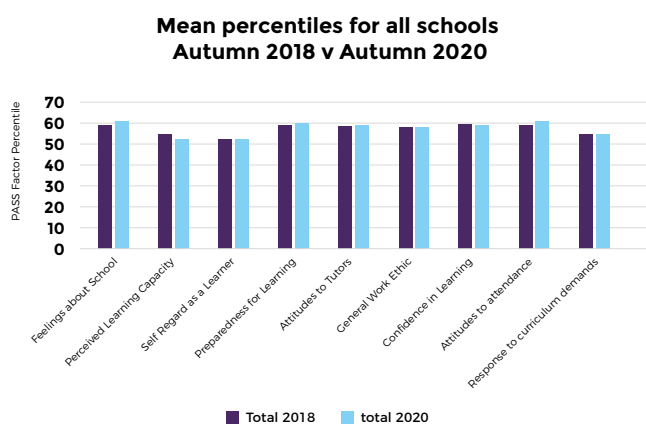
Accessing the wider curriculum

Fears were also expressed during the pandemic that any negative impact on student literacy would have a knock-on effect on the wider curriculum. Last year we published a report **Read All About It** that highlighted the strong correlation between reading ability and eventual exam success in a range of subjects. High scores in reading, for instance, were strongly correlated with good performances in maths and sciences as well as English and arts subjects.

As reading generally appears to have been minimally impacted, there is no reason to suppose that access to the wider curriculum has been curtailed. In fact, anecdotal evidence suggests that some schools have noticed an increase in students' text-based skills during the pandemic. When asked why they think this has happened, teachers have pointed to the way instruction was delivered remotely. Most teaching and learning depended on text-based assignments such as worksheets rather than multi-modal delivery. Lessons may have been online and high-tech, but the substance of what children were actually asked to do was firmly grounded in text. This, they suggest, may have greatly increased the literacy skills of students, particularly those of independent and high-ability readers.

Attitudes to school and learning

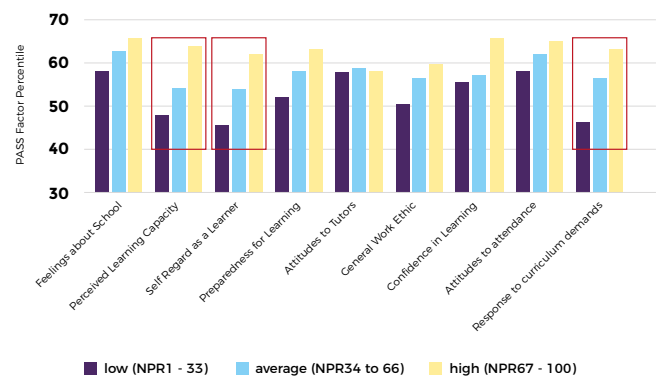
What of other indicators of student performance and wellbeing? Preliminary data for our Pupil Attitudes to Self and School (PASS) measure indicate that teachers can be cautiously optimistic here too. While some teachers were worried that students would not be looking forward to going back to school after lockdowns were lifted, initial assessments show that attitudes to school remained in line with levels pre-pandemic, in 2018. In some cases, there were even slight increases, in particular around students' feeling about school and attitudes to attendance.



Graph 1: PASS mean percentiles 2018 compared with 2020

However, while locked-down students may be keen to get back into the classroom, the PASS data does indicate some areas of concern, particularly in attitudes to their own abilities as learners. The graph on the right (taken from a GL Education analysis in 2020) demonstrates the link between attitudes – namely perceived learning capability, self-regard as a learner and response to curriculum demands – and reading ability. The steeper the difference, as highlighted, the stronger the correlation.

PASS Percentiles by NGRT (International)



Graph 2: comparison of reading ability (NGRT percentile rank) and PASS factors

As students return to the classroom, teachers would be well advised to look at the first of these indicators – perceived learning capability – in particular. Any increase in a student's negative attitudes in this area could develop into longer term confidence issues, and impair reading ability, if not investigated and addressed at the earliest opportunity.





Conclusion

Despite the many disruptions and challenges schools have had to face this past academic year, teachers and students appear to have coped remarkably well, especially when it comes to supporting reading.

Preliminary data from NGRT assessments carried out in international and UK schools and first-hand accounts from teachers paint a near universal picture – reading ability overall has not declined significantly. Primary school children have been affected a little more than secondary-age students, but not by much. Most children have made expected progress in reading – or indeed exceeded it, especially those in higher ability groups.

However, this relatively positive overall picture should not lead us to conclude that the pandemic has had no impact on children's reading. Some students have undoubtedly suffered and their reading ability has been impaired. Nor is it always obvious who has been worst affected or how – if decoding is resilient, is the same true of comprehension, for instance?

Teachers have told us that the pandemic and measures taken to alleviate its worst effects have often made it impossible to investigate what specific support individual children need or to put in place the necessary interventions. Where baseline NGRT data is available, benchmarking students' progress as they return to the classroom is proving helpful. But many schools are now urgently assessing their students as soon as is practicable to enable them to pinpoint exactly what children have learnt during lockdown, what has failed to stick and what teachers need to do address any gaps in their learning.

Lockdown is disruptive for all students – but especially for EAL learners. Maureen Baraniecki explains how she used the New Group Reading Test to drive and inform instruction

The Canadian School in Guadalajara is one of three in a chain of schools in Mexico that combined offer a bilingual education to just over 1,300 students from nursery to grade 9. Almost all the students are Mexican and almost all are English language learners.

In common with all schools in Mexico, the Canadian Schools in Guadalajara, Leon and Queretaro have been closed for in-person teaching since last March – with all classes being conducted remotely. They are not due to open fully until the next academic year. Naturally, this presents a challenge for any school, but particularly for one with students whose main language of instruction – English – isn't usually spoken at home. Understandably, the school wanted to know how students' language skills would fare during lockdown if they were not immersed in spoken English at home, what would that mean for their literacy and how could teachers best support them.

Adapting to lockdown

Maureen Baraniecki, Assistant Director responsible for instructional practice and assessment, admits that initially the school didn't get everything right when it came to remote learning. "We soon discovered that the children didn't fully engage if the learning sessions were 45 minutes long. There were too many distractions. Now we have shorter blocks of full-class sessions, with opportunities to socially connect as well as a focus on the learning topic. But with core instruction, particularly for elementary and early years, we're grouping students into smaller groups for much shorter periods of time – usually 15, 20 or 30 minutes depending on the age of the child."

The groups are small – typically with three to five students – and can be very targeted on areas like guiding reading strategy. Maureen says this is where the New Group Reading Test (NGRT) became invaluable. "Through analysis of NGRT we were able to decide how to cluster the students and based on assessment results we were able to determine the

curriculum expectations that would best suit student needs." Students can be in several overlapping small tuition groups and also receive one-on-one support for specific competencies.

"Once you go through the NGRT process you truly value how the analysis of data is applied consistently across the grades. We're able to know what we're looking for in terms of the components of literate behaviours, what are the students' strengths, where there are gaps or missing pieces and what we really need to address."

Using NGRT for curriculum adaptation

Until a few years ago, the school had relied on teacher assessment, which although benchmarked wasn't applied consistently and tended to be subjective. NGRT was gradually rolled out across all grades in all three of the group's schools and proved a much more reliable assessment tool. But it was during lockdown that its assessment strengths came to the fore – because the assessment allows teachers to pinpoint gaps in student knowledge, highlight where they might need help, and adapt the curriculum accordingly. "We now use this data to say, the writer's perspective wasn't something our students did well on," Maureen explains. "Or when it comes to inference and deductive reasoning – not a lot of evidence of much of that happening."

Maureen emphasises that NGRT is not just valuable for the Standard Age Scores (SAS) in the group report, it's also "the analysis of the reading behaviours that are captured through that assessment process. It gave us a tool that allowed our teachers with guidance of our literacy coaches to dig and sort and question and look. And that is where NGRT has served us to the maximum."

That in-depth interrogation was incredibly useful for her colleagues, Maureen explains. "All teachers understand differentiation. But the data allowed it to be very precise. We were able to see how assessment can truly inform and drive instruction." It allowed teachers to see, for instance, the types of questions students were most and least successful in answering, and the thinking and metacognitive skills they tended to apply.



How to assess

Maureen advises, however, that teachers need to be given time to work with the NGRT data to allow them to dig in and extrapolate what it reveals about particular students. When schools do that, “because of the organisation of the NGRT, you’re able to break it into different areas of focus – reading to remember, reading to understand, phonemic awareness, word study – and a student’s name can show up in some or all of these areas. But from there we can target the most pressing need for the student and put that instruction in place for them.”

Mexico’s blanket school lockdown meant that NGRT in-school assessments weren’t possible. So, while fully aware of the potential difficulties surrounding the reliability of results, the Canadian School trialled doing them remotely: “We realised the integrity of the data was compromised initially because we saw huge jumps in the kids’ data – the parents were helping,” says Maureen. The school then adopted a more rigorous approach: “We booked testing sessions with no more than three students at a time and asked the parents to film their child doing NGRT independently – the child had to wear headphones so there was no communication between the two. That way we had real time evidence. And we saw a correction in the scores. In the mid-year assessment cycle, we only used marker students – not the whole class – to take the temperature. Come spring, we’ll assess everyone to compare scores to the beginning of the year.”

Interventions and impact

The school did, however, notice a change in reading abilities during lockdown. Maureen says in pre-lockdown days students tended to be better at decoding but had more difficulties with recall and comprehension. “During lockdown recall skills not only held up well but improved – to the point where some of these kids are where you would expect native speakers to be. That tells us that we’ve done great work with vocabulary development and word meaning and their ability to capture the key idea.” Maureen says teachers will continue with that work to sustain that improvement, “but now we’ll start to get into the higher order thinking strategies and extending children’s understanding of the text.”

Was this progress true across all ability groups? “The progress of some of our lower ability students have been slower, but we’ve been surprised at how well the students who tended to need extra help with their English did... a high percentage of them met or exceeded expectations.” The school’s results replicate a topline **analysis** carried out by GL Education, which showed the reading ability in international schools barely declined last academic year.

Maureen puts the improvement down to two things: “The instructional strategies we selected for teachers to use in their reading classes – we use reciprocal teaching right from nursery school – and targeted intervention based on differentiated, small group

instruction.” The NGRT data allowed teachers not only to identify areas where students were having difficulty, but also to choose strategies that would address those reading behaviours. It allowed Maureen and her colleagues to model “precise instruction and embed it not only in EAL but also cross curricula”.

One unexpected benefit is that targeted interventions have made it easier for students to access other areas of the curriculum.

“Our teachers are attributing the improvement in math, which we were also quite surprised by, to the targeted intervention we put into comprehension strategies,” Maureen says. This finding from the Canadian Schools in Mexico is also backed up by earlier **analysis** done by GL Education of schools in the UK, which found that increased reading ability correlated strongly to performance in maths, science and other subjects.

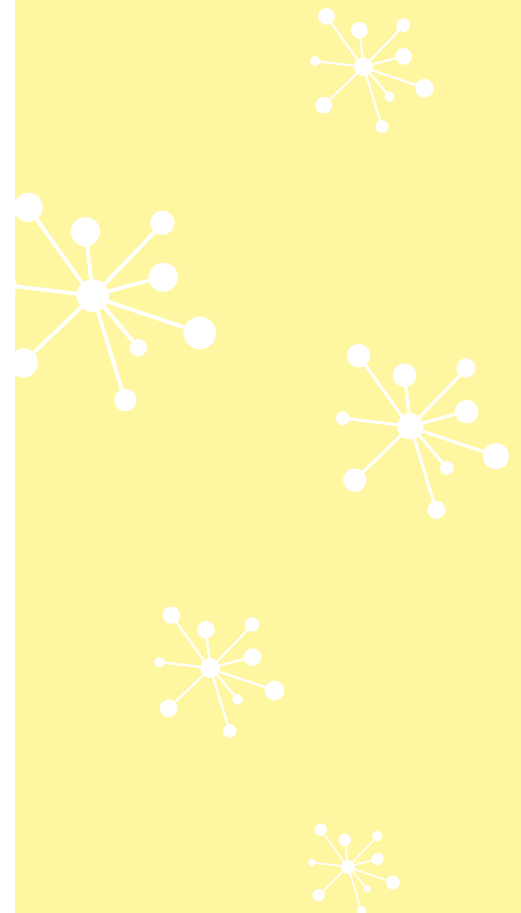
What’s next?

As to the future, Maureen says the challenge will be to try to keep doing what they’re doing “because it’s working”. It’s proved easier to deliver a differentiated programme remotely, for instance, but how will that work post-lockdown? “The challenge now is how do we keep the benefits of small group targeted instruction when there are 20 or more students in the room?”

When it comes to the NGRT assessment, she has this advice for other schools: “If leadership isn’t invested, your teachers won’t be either. If you only use data to see how kids are getting better without connecting it to the teaching – as well as who needs that teaching – then it’s very superficial and doesn’t really pay off.

“Use NGRT to learn more about your students as individuals not just as the cohort. And dig deeper to find out why students respond in particular ways to particular components within the assessment. Then as you start those questions you begin to understand more about the behaviour of that reader and can target instruction accordingly.”

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How can schools identify what support children need if the pandemic deprives them of the usual tools at their disposal? Amel Dali-bey outlines how assessment was able to help teachers shape the curriculum in a very challenging year

Lockdown for schools in the United Arab Emirates arrived much as it did for those in the most countries – initially as a measure designed to last a couple of weeks that was eventually extended to cover the remainder of the academic year as the severity of the pandemic became more apparent.

Nord Anglia International School, a large, well-established all-through day school in Dubai, was only able to reopen its doors to in-person teaching in September of last year. Since then, parents have had the choice either to send their children into school or continue with remote learning, with roughly 25-30% opting for the latter.

As the school caters to children from a wide range of nationalities – 76 at the last count – the school was mindful of the impact lockdown could have on literacy for children who weren't necessarily immersed in the language at home.

Fortunately, says Amel Dali-bey, the Head of English for Primary, most children's reading ability held up pretty well – with 49% of pupils making above average progress, 46% expected progress and only 5% registering less than expected progress, which mirrors the experience of international schools worldwide, according to a GL Education **analysis**. "A few of our lower-ability children made lower than expected progress during the period of home schooling, but at other end of the spectrum, higher ability children continued to read independently – there was no change in terms of progress." Girls generally tended to perform slightly better than boys, she says.

In-year tracking informs curriculum changes

The school has used the New Group Reading Test (NGRT) for several years, three times a year, and the wealth of data available provided a critical support. "When we started distance learning we had some data from our second data capture to inform our teaching of reading," says Amel. "The reason we originally chose NGRT is because it allows us to track in- year progress before the end of the year so we can plan interventions at the correct time, not only retrospectively."

The school promoted reading at home during lockdown through social media platforms "and tried to encourage a community of readers and promote reading for pleasure". Amel believes their efforts were largely successful, and the school is confident children have been reading. But lockdown made them aware as educators that they couldn't take anything for granted, which is why having a data baseline was so important. "You have to check for all ability ranges because some of the levers that were available in school aren't anymore."

'You can teach remotely, but it's harder to investigate remotely'

Online teaching posed its own challenges: "You can teach remotely, but it's harder to investigate remotely," Amel points out. There wasn't as much opportunity to listen to children read aloud, it wasn't as easy to question children, or to clarify understanding or any comprehension gap. Even with most children now back in school, teachers don't have as many opportunities to support readers as they had previously. "Children have to wear masks constantly in school and social distance measures are still in place so there aren't the opportunities for group guided reading sessions as we would have done previously."

Although the school wasn't able to assess students during lockdown, Amel still believes the assessment was invaluable. "Even without the pandemic, teachers tend to feel that reading is a difficult area to assess properly, but that's especially true remotely. So NGRT gave us valuable tools as we went into lockdown, especially as we had just completed an assessment, and we were able to modify our curriculum appropriately."



Next steps

The priority for Amel and her team for the rest of the academic year is to focus on comprehension and inference and, lower down the age range, phonics and phonic gaps. “We’ve also had a big push on widening our students’ vocabulary all the way from Year 1 to Year 6 and not just in English but across the curriculum, to check their understanding of vocab in science, for example.”

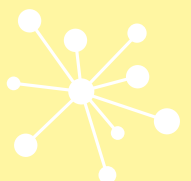
Amel points out that although NGRT gives a wealth of data it’s how you use it and what you do with it that’s important. “Tracking in year progress is very important, as is a clear assessment cycle, especially where you have a high turnover of students and high parental expectations.”

And there is one other benefit NGRT gives to teachers: valuable progress data to support conversations with parents: “It’s easier to explain that although your child may be working towards age-related expectations, they have made more than expected progress in reading, which is an incredibly useful thing to be able to say.”

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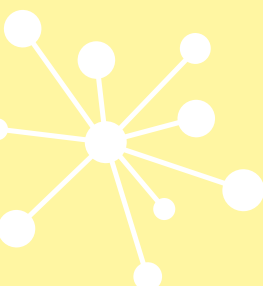
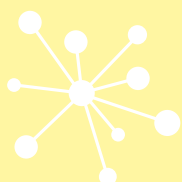
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How GL Education can help you

The Nord Anglia International School in Dubai and the Canadian School in Guadalajara, Mexico are great examples of the way GL Education has been able to work with schools during the pandemic to both help teachers uncover the issues some EAL students faced in reading during lockdown learning, as well as demonstrate the impact of interventions that were put in place.

Our New Group Reading Test® (NGRT) is ideal as a whole-class screener. It's a standardised, termly assessment that reliably measures reading skills to help schools get to the root of any problems precisely and quickly. And, as it's adaptive, it offers a personalised experience for each student, ensuring it's accessible for the children who are struggling and challenging those who need to be stretched.

NGRT is often used with the Cognitive Abilities Test (CAT4), where handy combination reports show how a student's current level of reading attainment compares to their potential achievement, and our Pupil Attitudes to Self and School (PASS) measure, which can highlight how a student's reading ability can impact on their attitudes to learning.

Schools can also choose from a wide range of diagnostic assessments to support areas for further investigation, based on NGRT results. These include the popular York Assessment of Reading for Comprehension (which looks at areas such as phonological skills and reading rate), the Phonological Assessment Battery (for phonological awareness) and the British Picture Vocabulary Scale (for receptive language).

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